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## **Teacher leadership in the context of distance learning**

### **Introduction**

This paper presents my reflections on the new experience of shifting our teaching from the traditional classroom environment to the distance learning arena. I am a secondary maths teacher at a public school in the emirate of Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The paper discusses the challenges and opportunities arising from the implementation of the distance teaching imposed by the spread of COVID-19. The paper also sheds light on changes stakeholders need to consider in order to improve the outcomes of the newly introduced distance education.

### **Unexpected distance learning in a well-equipped country**

The UAE is a growing country that considers education a high priority to achieve its ambitious social and economic goals (U.AE, 2020). Since 2012, the UAE has implemented progressive smart learning projects providing all teachers as well as students of grades 5 to 12 with laptops; these projects aim to raise the quality of education to meet international standards (Edarabia, 2020). Several educational platforms were introduced to facilitate learning, assessment and communication between teacher and students providing a blended learning environment in UAE schools. Significantly, the ICT infrastructure in the UAE is highly advanced; the UAE is a global leader in telecommunications and information and communications technology (ITU, 2017).

Amid the outbreak of COVID-19, the UAE's government has set plans to ensure the continuity of education while protecting society. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has rolled out a distance learning system for all students in the UAE (MOE, 2020). This is inclusive of all k-12 students where teachers and students stay in their homes and communicate through the internet. MOE provided students of grades 1 to 4 with laptops; even some private school students received devices and internet access to help them study online upon request (Sebugwaawo, 2020). The availability of devices and high quality internet service facilitated the employment of the distance learning initiative in the UAE. All students in the UAE have obtained access to distance learning; though the quality of

this access may vary according the quality of housing and family socio-economic conditions.

To ensure teachers' ability to deliver quality virtual lessons, MOE introduced intensive online training for teachers on how to plan, design and deliver effective online lessons using a range of platforms. These platforms provide the ability to implement both synchronous e-Learning, which is live, real-time, scheduled, facilitated instruction and learning-oriented interaction; and asynchronous e-Learning, online learning that is not confined by the constraints of time and place (Shahabadi and Uplane, 2015). Fortunately, we as teachers maintain reasonable autonomy in terms of the learning resources we use.

### **Challenges and opportunities of distance learning**

Unexpectedly, teachers in the UAE now find themselves responsible for providing their students an effective alternative to the traditional face to face learning. The prime minister of the UAE, HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashed Al Maktoum said, "Schools are closed, but education will never stop. The UAE is the well-equipped nation for smart learning." (Emirates 24/7, 2020).

Distance learning has introduced a range of challenges and ambitions to all stakeholders. For me as a teacher, the planning process has become much more time consuming. Another challenge is to employ the newly introduced platforms effectively. This, simultaneously, provided us as educators with numerous learning opportunities on how to plan, design deliver and assess effective online lessons that are engaging and cater for diverse learners. Teachers collaborate more than ever before on how to deal with emerging issues either related to their teaching subject or the technology they use in the distance learning context. The active collaboration among teachers to develop their professional knowledge and practice represents an evolving form of teacher leadership (Frost, 2010).

For me, the roles of school leaders in the new learning context are undetermined and need further clarification. I would expect school leaders to exercise emotionally intelligent leadership that positively influences teachers' instruction and consequently students' learning (Chen and Guo, 2020); such leadership is essential in the current pandemic. Also, School leaders should guide and support parents to become effectively engaged with their

children's learning through discussion, moral support and guidance (Goodall, 2015). This engagement is important to ensure that an appropriate learning environment is in place.

Parents are responsible for ensuring children's mental and physical safety during the lockdown and protecting them against fears, uncertainties, and physical and social isolation (Buheji et al., 2020). This is important when schools are prevented from providing children a physical space to share interests, thoughts, and emotions, which is necessary to satisfy their socialisation needs (Colao et al., 2020). Additionally, parents have become responsible for supporting their children's home learning, which may represent a huge burden on them given their other commitments and the number of children they may have. Considering that non-school factors are a primary source of inequalities in educational outcomes, the poor housing conditions of low-income families may significantly impede children's home learning (Van Lancker and Parolin, 2020). Some parents may need to upgrade their IT skills and some might lack sufficient English proficiency to support their children's learning, wherever maths and science are taught in English. Further, some low-income families may need to share devices among siblings, which may hinder many students from completing their home-schooling (OECD, 2020).

### **Teacher leadership challenges: Actual classroom vs. virtual classroom**

The implementation of distance learning introduced some pedagogical issues related to teachers' leadership of pedagogy that aims to enhance the educational process (Pounder, 2006). These issues include the limited ability to meet the standard expectations of classroom management, to employ cooperative learning strategies among students or to cater for diverse learners (differentiation).

In traditional classroom settings, I used to check my students' understanding and to provide timely feedback that guided their improvement; which is as of yet limited within the online learning environment. Also, classroom management in terms of dealing with student behaviour and attendance issues during the synchronous learning sessions is another challenge given the lack of face to face communication. Another significant challenge is the lack of ability to implement collaborative learning activities among students that used to be an effective learning strategy in a traditional classroom environment. I am not fully

aware of all educational platforms, but I believe that every platform has its limitations. This requires further research investigating the pros and cons of platforms in order to reach an integrated learning and assessment environment.

I and my colleagues try to increase student engagement and ownership in their learning. This strategy has worked well with a reasonable portion of students. However, this is not always the case as some students may either lack the motivation to learn or have a fixed mind-set about their learning ability (Dweck, 2015).

### **Paradoxical students' attitudes**

One exciting surprise that I have experienced is students' notable care about learning via the online environment. Surprisingly, many students who had previously paid little attention to my maths lessons showed increased interest in achieving the proposed online tasks. Perhaps students feared they may lose the education service they had previously taken for granted and hence started to appreciate its value. Another explanation would be the assumption that our students are 'digital natives' who think and process information differently from those of an older generation due to familiarity with new technology (Prensky, 2001). Consequently, students may be more eager to learn through modern communication technology than traditional methods.

This phenomenon is worth further investigation, which would inform the literature on the model of post-COVID-19 education system that the UAE government is currently considering.

### **Conclusion**

The innovative distance learning experience in the UAE is a very promising prospect. The clear vision of education as a national priority and ongoing development efforts indicate future achievements. Having said that, there is a need for thoughtful collaboration among stakeholders to ensure equity in terms of education access to all UAE students considering the varied socio-economic circumstances. This is important in order to ensure distance education will not disadvantage vulnerable groups in society (Boeren, Roumell and Roessger, 2020). Policy makers and school administrators must develop robust strategies that help parents to enhance children's learning and ensure their wellbeing.

Teacher training programmes should focus on enhancing teacher leadership in the distance learning context by helping them to employ effective learning strategies. Training should inform teachers on how to deal with issues related to students' behaviour and attendance management, differentiation, providing timely feedback and employing collaborative learning strategies. A necessary policy priority is to review roles and responsibilities of school leaders and supporting staff; the traditional strategies of supporting, monitoring and evaluating teachers should be revised to fit with the distance learning context.

The current crisis in education caused by COVID-19 has raised crucial questions for educators and researchers like myself. It has led me to consider the distance learning model in the UAE from a variety of perspectives. Hopefully this paper may contribute to the discussion among stakeholders in the UAE and beyond designed to ensure the best possible educational outcome for all students.

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